

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 289 325

EC 201 286

AUTHOR Krivacska, James J.
TITLE Computerized IEP Management Systems.
PUB DATE Mar 87
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Association of School Psychologists (19th, New Orleans, LA, March 4-8, 1987).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Computer Managed Instruction; Computer Software; Computer Uses in Education; *Disabilities; Elementary Secondary Education; *Individualized Education Programs; *Management Information Systems; *Microcomputers; Needs Assessment; Program Implementation; School Psychologists

ABSTRACT

The preparation of the Individualized Education Program (IEP) for each handicapped child is seen as cumbersome and time consuming and involves writing similar goals and objectives repetitively for different students. Utilization of a microcomputer-based IEP preparation system has a significant impact on this process and what the school psychologist needs to know about computerized systems and what questions should be asked are the focus of this paper, which describes: (1) the steps the school psychologist should take prior to searching for a computerized system; (2) selection criteria and questions; and (3) implementation issues. The advantages and disadvantages of computerized systems should be considered in a preliminary needs analysis phase. Software specifications should be clearly defined and categorized as absolutely necessary or highly desirable. Implementation issues include staff training in both general computer skills and in software use, parent involvement in the computerization process, and quality control. (JDD)

* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *

ED289325

COMPUTERIZED IEP MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS

James J. Krivacska, PsyD

Educational Program Consultants

Paper Presented at the

Annual Meeting of the
National Association of School Psychologists
New Orleans
March, 1987

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS
MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

*James J.
Krivacska*

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES
INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

FC 201286

Computerized IEP Management Systems

James J. Krivacska*

Educational Program Consultants

Existing IEP Preparation Processes and Justification for Computerized Systems

Beginning with the passage of PL 94-142 and, to a lesser extent, its predecessor, Section 504 of the Federal Rehabilitation Act (PL 93-112), the public schools have been required to provide a "free and appropriate education" to all handicapped students. An "appropriate education" is described as one designed to meet the individual educational needs of an educationally handicapped student. The child's educational needs are to be identified as a result of an individually administered, comprehensive, multi-disciplinary team assessment. The Individualized Educational Program (IEP) results from that evaluation and defines what an "appropriate education" should be for the handicapped child.

As a written plan for the education of handicapped students, the IEP outlines the specific components of the child's educational program and delineates specific goals and objectives to guide the instructional program.

PL 94-142 specifies certain components that must be present in all IEPs including:

1. The Current Educational Status outlining the child's current levels of functioning;
2. a listing of annual goals and short term objectives;
3. a description of the specific educational program which will assist the student to meet these goals and objectives including any related services and a statement as to the degree to which the child may participate in the regular educational program;
4. identification of the dates services are to begin and their duration;
5. specification of evaluation procedures and a schedule for review of the child's program.

* Dr. Krivacska is a practicing school psychologist and private consultant in the area of program development and evaluation. Dr. Krivacska is also the author of a computerized IEP management system, THE IEP PLANNER (4.0). Additional information regarding this presentation is available from Dr. Krivacska at the following address: Dr. James J. Krivacska, Educational Program Consultants, 51 Cleveland Avenue, Milltown, NJ 08850.

Despite the obvious advantages of such a programmatic approach to the development of a child's special education program, the IEP preparation process has frequently been criticized as cumbersome and time consuming for staff given the amount of time that must usually be spent writing goals and objectives and preparing the IEP document. Time spent in IEP preparation is frequently seen as time taken away from direct service to staff and children. Additionally, when attempts are made to develop comprehensive IEPs it has been frequently observed that staff are often writing similar goals and objectives over and over for different students. Another concern that has been expressed involves the problem of forgetting some step in a learning sequence when writing an IEP given the limited time staff has to spend thinking about and writing IEPs.

The role of the school psychologist in IEP preparation varies considerably. In some states the school psychologist performs the bulk of the assessment including social and family history, educational and psychological assessment. It usually falls to the school psychologist in such settings to also develop the IEP. In other locations, the school psychologist may be part of a team of child study professionals including a social worker and a learning consultant. Frequently the school psychologist in that setting may only be involved in writing emotional or behavioral goals and objectives. Regardless of the role played, however, to the extent that the IEP becomes the foundation for the child's special education program, the school psychologist has an importance interest in how IEPs are prepared and implemented.

The advent of micro-computers has resulted in a proliferation of computer applications in schools, including computerized IEP programs. Utilization of a computerized IEP preparation system has a significant impact on the IEP process and the school psychologist should therefore be involved in the process of selecting, developing and implementing computerized systems.

What the school psychologist needs to know about computerized systems and what questions should be asked are the focus of this presentation. The presentation will describe the steps that should be taken prior to beginning the search for a computerized system, selection criteria and questions, and, finally, describes issues related to the implementation of computerized IEP management systems.

Preparation and Analysis of Need

Prior to making a decision to purchase a computerized system, a review of current IEP preparation procedures needs to be conducted. Computerized IEP management systems are not for all school districts and the advantages and disadvantages of such systems must be weighted in light of local context factors.

The advantages of a computerized system include:

- IEP preparation is time consuming and frequently repetitive. Computerized systems usually reduce the amount of time spent writing IEPs thus freeing staff to provide other direct services;

- Computerized IEPs usually include a data bank of goals and objectives. This data bank forms the basis for a coordinated and uniform set of objectives, based on curriculum needs for the district which should increase consistency in IEPs and aid in overall evaluation of the degree to which special education services are meeting student needs from a systems level;
- such systems usually reduce the amount of typing time by clerical staff thus either freeing them for other activities or permitting a reduction in clerical support staff;
- the accuracy and accessibility of IEP information increases.

Computerization frequently entails disadvantages as well and numerous problems can develop from computerized IEP systems and include:

- potentially, a loss of individualization in the preparation of IEPs may result from inappropriate use of the system;
- the cost of initial set up time and the cost of the purchase of the system and necessary hardware is usually high. Additionally, much of the existing software is not of the highest quality;
- the data bank of goals and objectives that come with these systems is frequently inappropriate or incomplete for local needs (e.g., a special needs school);
- Usually, the format of the IEP is defined by the computer program thus resulting in the school having to change the structure and format (look) of their IEP to conform with what the program demands;
- Inevitably the manner in which IEPs are prepared in the school will have to be changed and staff is frequently resistant to the changes required by a computerized system due to lack of familiarity with computers.

Explication of these advantages and disadvantages must be made and considered in light of the needs of the local school system. Staff should be involved in the process to reduce resistance to what is often seen as a depersonalized, computerized system that doesn't serve student's interests.

The manner in which IEPs are currently prepared must be examined to determine if the greatest advantage of computerized IEPs (time savings) is realistic. For example, if the special education teachers currently prepare all the IEPs for their students, a computerized system would be quicker for them and have little or no impact on the school psychologist or other members of the multi-disciplinary team, and would result in an increased workload for clerical staff.

In another example, a school district may complete all their Annual Review IEPs at the end of the school year. If these IEPs include typing by a secretary then a considerable time savings for the secretary will accrue from use of a computerized system. If, however, the secretary was not previously involved in IEP preparation (i.e., if the final IEP document was merely the handwritten copy

prepared by the teacher) then the workload for the secretary will increase considerably. Generally speaking, whoever prepares the IEP will find that the computerized system reduces that preparation time.

An additional concern frequently relates to the parents role in IEP preparation. This will be discussed in more detail a little later in the presentation but is an important consideration. A frequent concern relates to the obtaining of the parent's signature. Does the parent sign a blank form at the end of the IEP conference which is attached when the computer printed version of the IEP is printed out or is the parent sent a copy of the computer printed IEP and asked to sign and return it. These types of logistical questions, though seemingly trivial, can severely handicapped the implementation of an computerized system if not thought out ahead of time.

As noted in the list of disadvantages, concern over loss of individualization is a frequently proffered reason against implementation of a computerized system of IEP preparation. The concern however is not so much related to computerized versus non-computerized systems of IEP preparation as it is to the issue of how goals and objectives are selected or written. Individualization is just as much a concern where a child study team member or teacher writes the same quick, short goals and objectives for everyone for the sake of expediency. To the extent to which staff members carefully select the goals and objectives from a computerized data bank that are appropriate for the identified child, individualization is served. Nevertheless, caution must be exercised given the existence of some computerized IEP system that go so far as to provide cookbook, pre-written statements and phrases which the user selects to form, for example, the Current Educational Status. Preparation of a current educational status or team conclusions in this manner places the individualization concern at serious risk since no data bank can be so comprehensive as to permit accurate description of a given child in this manner.

Finally, the quality of the goals and objectives data bank that accompanies most computerized IEP programs is critical. Unfortunately, experience has shown that they frequently need considerable rewriting to be made compatible with local curriculum. As will be discussed later, the ease with which changes to the goals and objectives data bank can be made will be a critical factor in the selection of a computerized system.

Integration of all of these concerns and considerations as well as an analysis of the amount of time currently spent by staff in the preparation of IEPs, the number of IEPs prepared per year, and the availability of funds and equipment should lead to a decision about the purchase of a computerized system. Given the decision to proceed with the acquisition of the computerized IEP management system several important criteria must be applied to the selection process and are described next.

Review of Computerized Systems and Selection Criteria

Prior to beginning a search for appropriate software, specifications should be drawn up listing what are considered the absolutely necessary features of a

computerized system and a list of the highly desirable features. Development of such a list will allow comparisons between systems. At minimum the following should be considered:

1. what is the availability of the program for preview; availability of talking with current users;
2. what support services are available. What is the warranty and backup disk policy;
3. how comprehensive, readable and clear is the user's manual in describing program use and operation;
4. what degree of computer sophistication is required to use the program;
5. how flexible is the program in meeting special district needs;
6. what special local district requirements for IEP format or appearance do you have;
7. can IEPs be saved for future reference and how many IEPs may be saved;
8. does the program have text entry capabilities for current educational status, reason for referral, team conclusions, etc.;
9. how easy can corrections be made;
10. are all the legally required parts of the IEP included;
11. is the data bank sufficiently large enough for district needs (a minimum of 1000 statements for a K-12 district), and can revisions, additions, etc. to the data bank be made by the user;
12. is the software compatible with hardware system specifications (memory requirements, printer type, etc.)

Once specifications have been drawn up outlining what is needed and what questions are to be asked in reviewing prospective programs, review of currently available software may begin. Unfortunately, it is unlikely a system will be found that meets the specifications 100% and some prioritizing may have to take place. If no program can be found that is satisfactory, then a custom developed program may have to be considered though these will cost anywhere from \$2,000 to \$10,000 depending the the complexity required.

Implementation of Computerized IEP Management Systems

Once a program has been selected, concern shifts to implementation to ensure appropriate use of the system. Implementation affects two groups of individuals; those who prepare the IEP and those who will input the IEP into the computer.

Implementation issues for preparers of IEP

This group usually includes members of multi-disciplinary groups, special education teachers, and others. Explanation of how to use the system should be primarily restricted to their role. There is little need for the preparers to know the specifics of the computer operation. Most critical for this staff is discussion of how to select goals and objectives from the data bank. An observed tendency for individuals who go to a computerized system, is that they tend to start writing much longer IEPs. It is much easier to write a code than to write out a complete statement, and with pages of statements to choose from, staff members frequently get over-specific in their IEPs when they first begin to write them.

Learning to identify the important objectives for the particular child in question will be the key to the computerized system becoming efficient, appropriate and effective.

Specific instructions on how to fill out the coding sheets that are passed on to the secretary and from which information is typed into the computer is very important and frequently misunderstood. Staff often don't understand the limitations of a computer that can accept information in only certain prescribed ways. For example, a teacher may think it useful to combine two objectives in the data bank into one statement and record the codes for the two statements on the coding sheet in the same location expecting the the secretary will be able to combine the statements in the IEP. If the computerized system that is being used can't do that the end result will be either a very confused or aggravated secretary. The limitations of the system must be clearly articulated to staff to avoid future confusion and misunderstanding.

Finally, how to involve parents in this process is a frequently expressed concern. A suggested process is for staff to come to the IEP conference with a rough draft of the IEP in the form of the codes for statements they feel are appropriate. Then, with the parent present, a review is made of the current educational status identifying a particular area to be addressed by the IEP. The participants should turn to the page in the goals and objectives data bank manual and review the possible statements for that area. The district staff individual may suggest statements they have already selected and the parent may note others in the area they feel are appropriate. As statements are agreed upon, the code for that statement is recorded on the coding sheet and participants move on to the next area. This process continues until the IEP is completed.

Preparation of clericals

Prior to any training in the use of the computerized system, those who are to use the computer should receive generalized training in the use of the particular computer in use in the office. Such training is frequently available through local computer dealers.

Once comfortable with the computer, users should receive training in the use of the computerized IEP system. Some publishers actually will provide direct training in the use of the program. Most however, only provide a user's manual.

The secretary needs to be given sufficient time to learn and practice the system prior to being asked to do real IEPs.

Finally, secretaries should be taught what to expect in the various parts of the coding sheets so they can catch obvious errors that may be made by staff (for example, if goals in the data bank are coded as numbers and the highest number is 495 and the secretary is inputting an IEP and is provided with a code for a goal that's numbered 678, they should realize an error has been made and return to IEP to the originator for correction).

Conclusion

In summary, computerized IEP management systems can help prepare IEPs that are meaningful and appropriate to the special education needs of handicapped students while also increasing efficiency in production of the IEP document for the local school district. Concerns about loss of individualization, while a potential problem, can be avoided by the maintenance of a professional approach to IEP development. The benefits to staff, particularly to the extent they are freed to perform other direct service activities, can be significant and as a consequence enhance the overall provision of special education services in the school district.